

Senate Committee on Indian Affairs  
Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Richard Rominger  
June 14, 2000

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss USDA programs and services that benefit Native Americans and to offer comments on Senate Bill 2282, the *Native American Agricultural Research, Development and Export Enhancement Act of 2000*. I would also like to speak briefly about reforms at the Department of Agriculture. We appreciate your strong support of Indian agriculture and agribusiness, Mr. Chairman, and your continued interest in strengthening USDA programs and services that benefit Native Americans.

As you know, a discussion of American Indians and agriculture is really a history lesson. Indians were the original North American farmers, working the land some 7,000 years before European settlers arrived. As you mentioned in your introduction to this bill, Mr. Chairman, agriculture is the second largest revenue generator and employer in Indian country. More than 80 percent of the 55 million acres of Indian lands in the United States consist of crop and range land. And these lands are in the most rural areas of our country. So when we talk about supporting Indian agriculture, we're also talking about supporting rural communities.

This Administration is committed to strengthening the ties that bind our nations and making this a land of opportunity for all our people. Of course, everyone in this room knows this is easier said than done, particularly in Indian country where unemployment often exceeds 50 percent, where nearly half of young children live in poverty and where per capita income is roughly half the U.S. average. If we are to change these statistics, we need to get at their roots. Some are

intertwined with the rural way of life: lack of access to capital, and remote, dispersed populations are challenges facing many rural communities. Other roadblocks are unique, such as a lack of understanding and communication across Indian and non-Indian lines.

We have certainly experienced this at USDA, and we are changing the way we do business. We are a more diverse department – one that is better able to serve all the people we are here to serve. If you want to work at USDA today, you have to abide by a simple rule: treat every customer and co-worker fairly and equitably, with dignity and respect. It's the golden rule: treat others as you would like to be treated yourself. We have implemented close to 100 recommendations for change in the way we handle civil rights issues– from a new foreclosure policy to ensure people do not lose their land while discrimination complaints are pending-- to a small farms advisory committee that is helping us better understand how the pressures of race, economics and rural life which threaten our family farm heritage.

The Department of Agriculture is also making significant progress in increasing program participation in Indian country. The Department is preparing an update to a February 1999 report to Congress on American Indian and Alaska Native participation in USDA programs and services which will be available in a few weeks. I'd like to share a few highlights of that report with you today.

By making outreach to Native American and Alaska Native communities a priority, this Administration has dramatically increased USDA program activities in Indian Country. For example, in fiscal year 1999, the Rural Development mission area provided more than \$10 million in business programs loan and grant assistance to American Indians and Alaska Natives, compared to a total of \$13.3 million over the fiscal years 1988-1996. Since 1993, the Rural

Housing Service has averaged more than \$10 million each year in grants and loans to American Indians and Alaska Natives to finance essential services such as child care facilities, fire and emergency services, high schools, colleges, hospitals, clinics, nursing homes and museums. This is more than thirty times the amount that was given out in the four years before this Administration, when USDA only gave \$1.9 million to Indian country for these facilities. In fiscal year 1999, USDA was able to top its all-time high record for number of community facility projects in Indian Country, funding 22 projects on 21 reservations and Alaska Native Communities.

USDA is also making steady progress in helping tribes bring safe, reliable, running water to their people. In FY 1999 alone, the Rural Utility Service obligated more than \$48 million to safe and clean water projects in Native American communities and Native Alaskan villages, improving the quality of life and providing more than 1,000 new jobs. By comparison, the average annual Water and Waster tribal investment from 1988 to 1997 was approximately \$5.5 million.

USDA's farm loan programs also show improvement. While Native Americans account for 0.5 percent of the Nation's farms, they currently represent 1.5% of USDA's 103,466 borrowers, the greatest number of Native American borrowers since FY 1994 when the Department reorganization moved farm loan programs into what became the Farm Service Agency. And that number is increasing thanks to the outreach efforts of the Farm Service Agency and its tribal partners. For example, since the beginning of the Stone Child College/Farm Service Agency Ag Credit Outreach Program in January 1998, more than 2.3 million dollars in loans have been made to dozens of tribal members on the seven Indian reservations in Montana, many of whom had never before participated in FSA programs. In just the past six months, more than one million

dollars in loans were made under this program to help tribal members in Montana purchase farms and ranches, provide operating capital and for other ag related projects.

In 1998, the Farm Service Agency began implementing a new \$12.5 million emergency livestock feed program to help Indian tribes. This program is administered through tribal governments. As of last month, only \$2.7 million remains and that amount is quickly being spent to assist tribes suffering livestock feed emergencies because of natural disasters.

The Department is also helping Indian agricultural producers promote their products in international markets. Since FY 1998, the Foreign Agricultural Service has granted more than \$1.1 million to tribal organizations to conduct export readiness seminars that identify, qualify, and train American Indian owned companies on export promotion and foreign trade show participation.

USDA agencies not normally associated with Indian programs have also been active in serving Native Americans. For example, in December 1999, USDA agencies responded to a Department-wide request to help find Y2K compliant personal computers for tribal colleges and universities on Indian reservations. Under the leadership of our Chief Information Office, we have distributed more than 400 fully functional, Y2K compliant personal computers to 25 tribal colleges and universities.

The Department of Agriculture is committed to making sure that Native Americans not only have equal access to all of our programs, but that they know about USDA programs. USDA agencies are stepping up their outreach activities to tribes and the results are heartening. For example, the number of elected Native American Farm Service Agency County Committee members has nearly tripled in the past four years-- from 51 in 1996 to 146 in 1999. The Farm

Service Agency has a National Native American Liaison and an outreach coordinator in every state and is currently operating under five separate cooperative agreements targeting the needs of Native American tribes and Alaskan Native communities. These programs, which will be outlined in more detail in the upcoming report, have been extremely successful.

USDA agencies regularly conduct outreach meetings with tribes. Just last week, for example, the North Dakota State Farm Service Agency, and the state offices of Rural Development, and the Natural Resources and Conservation Service held a three-day conference for all Native American producers and tribal government officials throughout the Great Plains Region to discuss USDA programs with the tribes and to help USDA learn more about tribal customs and cultures. A similar meeting was held with the seven tribes of Montana last month. USDA also has a strong partnership with the Intertribal Agriculture Council which plays an invaluable role in our outreach efforts. And the 1994 Institutions provide an important function as our partners in carrying out USDA-sponsored programs in education and outreach.

While we are making significant progress in expanding USDA programs and improving services to Indian people, there is still much work to be done and I thank this Committee for its interest and support in this effort as evidenced by Senate Bill 2282, a bill to reorganize the Department's Native American Programs Office. The Department has had an office in place to coordinate all USDA activities for American Indians since 1973. In 1992, the Department established the position of Director of Native American Programs in the Office of Intergovernmental Affairs. The Director of Native American Programs is USDA's primary contact with tribal governments and their members and has the primary responsibility for coordinating USDA's service to American Indians and Alaska Natives. The Native American

Programs Director also works closely and cooperatively with the Department's Office of Outreach.

Senate Bill 2282 substantially expands the responsibilities of the Native American Programs Office, including establishing a Native American export and trade promotion program to help develop tribal economies and to provide technical assistance in identifying and entering markets for Indian goods and services. In principle, the Department supports efforts to strengthen the roles and responsibilities of this office. While our agencies are making great improvements in serving Native American communities, there is still a need for a strong, central office to ensure Department-wide coordination of these important issues. The Department welcomes the opportunity to work out the details of this legislation with the Committee staff.

If our goal is a strong government-to-government relationship that is evident not just on paper but in tribal communities across this land, then all of us –tribal leaders, government leaders, and business leaders–have to make a strong, shared commitment not just to economic development, but to economic empowerment. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for sharing this commitment.